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ABSTRACT

An examination of the extent to which the polylectal grammar, a unified grammar constructed by a listener that subsumes the dialect differences that he has to cope with in a multidialectal situation, is an appropriate means of modelling listeners' receptive command of dialects other than their native one presents evidence that cross-dialectal misunderstandings involving speakers of standard English and speakers of Hiberno-English can be considered symptomatic of a deep-seated structural mismatch between particular grammatical subsystems in the two varieties. It is proposed that for at least some speakers there is little or no awareness of major structural divergences, and that these kinds of misunderstandings should be examined for insights into the strategies that speaker-hearers use in cross-dialectal communication. It is suggested that these and other findings from the literature support the assumption that 100% correct identification of structural cues in utterances is not a necessary prerequisite to viable communication between speakers of different dialects. (Author/MSE)

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The polylectal grammar stops here

John Harris

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CLCS Occasional Paper No.13

Spring 1985

THE POLYLECTAL GRAMMAR STOPS HERE

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0 INTRODUCTION

This paper queries the extent to which the polylectal grammar is an appropriate means of modelling listeners' receptive command of dialects other than their native one. Evidence is presented of cross-dialectal misunderstandings involving speakers of standard English and speakers of Hiberno-English which can be considered symptomatic of a deep-seated structural mismatch between particular grammatical subsystems in the two varieties. It appears that, for at least some speakers, there is little or no awareness of these major structural divergences. In the case of Hiberno-English speakers, this is perhaps surprising in view of the fact that they experience sustained exposure to the standard language. Comprehension breakdowns of this type are worth investigating for the insights they offer into the sorts of strategies speaker-hearers employ in cross-dialectal communication. The findings presented here and elsewhere in the literature lend support to the assumption that 100 per cent correct identification of structural cues in utterances is not a necessary prerequisite to viable communication between speakers of different dialects.[1]

1 POLYLECTAL GRAMMARS

What is it that enables speakers of different dialects to understand one another? Attempts at answering this question have tended to focus on two quite different sets of criteria. Some responses stress the functional relatedness of particular dialects as well as the motivational and sociocultural factors that influence the extent to which they are mutually intelligible (e.g. Wolff 1964). Others stress structural factors in the assumption that it is relatedness at this level that allows cross-dialectal communication to take place (e.g. Agard 1971). The most explicit formulation of the latter position is the polylectal grammar hypothesis (e.g. Bailey 1973). Briefly put, this proposes that speaker-hearers achieve receptive competence in a range of varieties besides their native one by constructing a unified grammar that subsumes all the dialect differences they

have to cope with as members of multilectal speech communities. In some cases, polylectal competence is assumed to be primarily receptive (e.g. Bailey 1973); in others, it is observed, speakers gain some degree of productive control over a range of different lects (e.g. Bickerton 1975).

From the speaker-hearer's point of view, the degree of difficulty involved in constructing a polylectal grammar presumably depends on the degree of structural similarity or divergence between the different lects he or she has to deal with. Since the polylectal competence model has been formulated in terms of a modified version of transformational generative grammar, the nature of this task has usually been identified as involving either the restructuring of underlying representations or the manipulation of rules. In post-creole communities, it has been shown that shifting between basilectal and acrolectal varieties necessitates quite radical restructuring of underlying representations (e.g. De Camp 1971, Bickerton 1975). The extent of structural divergence between a superstrate language and its creole or post-creole relatives can usually be assumed to reflect transfer from the substrate languages or perhaps the operation of universal contact-induced processes. Structural differences among non-creole cognate varieties, on the other hand, are generally assumed to be much less deep-seated (e.g. Postal 1968:284; Agard 1971; Wakelin 1977:125). In situations of contact between such 'mainstream' dialects, the construction of polylectal grammars thus has more superficial structural implications than in post-creole communities. The conventional generative wisdom is that dialects of the same language (at least 'mainstream' ones) share an underlying panlectal identity and differ only in matters of low-level realisation. This is interpreted as meaning that related dialects have, at the phonological level, a shared body of lexical representations and, at the syntactic level, a shared body of phrase structure rules. (Explicit formulations of this hypothesis are to be found, for example, in Chomsky & Halle 1968 (49,54) and Agard 1971.) According to this view, dialect divergence manifests itself in the shape of low-level rule differences (e.g. King 1969:ch 3). The construction of polylectal grammars under conditions of interface between dialects that are related in this way thus proceeds via the manipulation of low-level rules (Bailey 1973). Comprehension of forms that are characteristic of unfamiliar dialects can thus be achieved by mapping them onto underlying structures that are already available in the native grammar.

Particularly since Labov first posed the question 'Where do grammars stop?'(1973), sociolinguists have been gathering more and more evidence which suggests that, if the notion of the polylectal grammar does correspond to any empirical reality at all, its domain of application is sharply restricted. Much of the relevant literature contains results obtained through formal test procedures which show respondents often to be unable to assign correct interpretations to forms that occur in dialects other than their own (e.g. Labov 1973, Trudgill 1982). In some cases, poor performance in such tests can simply be attributed to lack

of familiarity with the forms in question. In others, however, comprehension failures appear to be symptomatic of structural differences between dialects. Particularly problematical in this respect are superficially identical or similar forms which have divergent semantic readings in different dialects. Berdan (1977), for example, discusses ambiguities and comprehension difficulties that arise in cases where the same surface string is interpreted differently by speakers of black and white varieties of English. Lack of cross-dialectal intelligibility in some of these cases can plausibly be put down to low-level rule differences, which of course is in keeping with the view that related dialects retain a shared identity at an underlying level. Other cases, however, point to the conclusion that deep-seated structural mismatches exist between dialects that are intuitively felt to belong to the same language. Striking evidence of such mismatches comes from observed cross-dialectal misunderstandings or breakdowns in communication (see particularly Lesley Milroy's 1984 discussion).

The observed cases of cross-dialectal miscommunication that I report here involve speakers of standard English (StE) and speakers of Hiberno-English (HE). The communicative problems they illustrate can be considered symptomatic of deep-seated differences in the way the tense-aspect systems of the two varieties are organised. Two examples result from standard listeners misinterpreting utterances produced by HE speakers. This is not a particularly surprising state of affairs. Most accounts of polylectal competence implicitly recognise that, in conditions of interface between standard and nonstandard varieties, the onus is on speakers of the latter, for obvious sociolinguistic reasons, to adapt to standard norms. In contrast, there are generally no strong pressures on standard speakers to adapt their receptive competence to local vernacular norms. The other examples, however, appear to stem from the failure of HE listeners to assign appropriate interpretations to standard utterances. These cases are particularly significant, since they indicate that at least some HE speakers do not have full receptive control of StE despite being continuously exposed to that variety in institutional contexts. This raises the question as to what enables such speakers to understand StE utterances, which they undoubtedly do most of the time. It has been pointed out that the fact of cross-dialectal comprehension does not provide sufficient evidence for the existence of polylectal grammars (Berdan 1977). Examples of cross-dialectal miscomprehension suggest that the polylectal grammar may not even be a necessary component in a model of how otherwise successful cross-dialectal communication takes place. There is a good case to be made for assuming that listeners rely on a whole range of nonstructural cues in addition to structural ones to enable them to decode messages that are encoded by means of rules that are not isomorphic with those of their native grammar.

It might be objected that the degree of structural divergence exhibited by HE in relation to StE is a reflection of interference from Irish Gaelic and is thus not typical of conditions of interface between standard and nonstandard

varieties of English. In other words, HE might be considered similar in at least some respects to other contact varieties such as creoles or post-creoles which we know to be structurally quite distinct from their related superstrate languages. It might be pointed out that a panlectal grammar of English was never intended to include contact varieties of this type. Rather it is to be restricted to 'mainstream' dialects which are the outcome of continuous transmission from native speaker to native speaker over many generations. (See Todd 1975 and Thomason & Kaufman 1975 for discussions of the criteria by which contact and non-contact varieties might be distinguished.) Certainly many nonstandard features of HE phonology and syntax can be traced to an Irish Gaelic source. However, in the area of tense and aspect that I examine here (roughly speaking the temporal scope covered by the StE perfect), the extent of Irish interference can be shown to be sharply restricted. Many of the points at which the HE verb-phrase diverges from the standard pattern have a background in Early Modern English and survive to a certain extent in some present-day non-contact dialects. In fact, as the number of studies of nonstandard syntax mounts up, so does the number of counterexamples to the hypothesis that all 'mainstream' varieties of English share an underlying structural identity. (See Edwards et al 1983 for a useful summary of some of these features in British English.)

2 THE HIBERNO-ENGLISH 'PERFECTS'

Four of the main temporal-aspectual categories that are coded in British StE by means of the present perfect form can be glossed briefly as follows:

Resultative: past event(s) with present relevance (e.g. Peggy has finished the book).

Hot news: event located at a point that is temporally close to but separated from the present (e.g. Joe has just arrived).

Indefinite present anterior: event(s) occurring at an unspecified point(s) located in a period leading up to the present (e.g. Have you ever been to New York?).

Extended now: situation initiated in the past and persisting into the present (e.g. I've known Mary for some years now).[2]

Generally speaking, the standard perfect form is absent from basic HE. Instead, HE speakers have available to them a range of verbal forms and periphrastic constructions which can make the distinctions among the four temporal-aspectual categories just outlined transparent. HE has two resultatives: a transitive construction formed with have and an en-participle placed after the object noun-phrase (as in (1)), and an intransitive formed with be and an en-participle (as in (2)). I will refer to these as PRI (following Greene 1979) and the be

resultative respectively.[3]

(1) I have it pronounced wrong.
(Susan X , Belfast.)

(2) I went back to school and all, but I'm not too long left.
(Mick C., Belfast.)

One of the most strikingly nonstandard features of HE is a hot-news perfect (also referred to as PI or the 'immediate perfect' - again see Greene 1979) which is realised as be after V+ing, as in

(3) I was after coming down the stairs.
(Maura D., Belfast.)

In HE, this form refers exclusively to immediate past time; it never has the 'future of intention' reading that a superficially similar construction may have in some types of colloquial British English (as in He wants to cut up to 1500 jobs - that's what he's after doing).

Unlike British StE, basic HE does not have a grammaticalised distinction between past anterior (then time) and indefinite present anterior. British StE generally uses the preterite to signal the former and the perfect for the latter. (Compare I visited Paul once when I was in Canada with I've visited Paul twice since coming to Canada.) HE uses the preterite in both cases. The following utterance illustrates the HE use of the preterite rather than the standard perfect to code indefinite present anterior time:

(4) I never saw a gun in my life, nor never saw one fired.
(Maggie H., Belfast.)

HE is similar to many languages other than English in using a present form to code extended-now time, as in

(5) I have this class only since Christmas, and they're ... since July.
(John H., Belfast.)

(6) Q: Have you always lived here?
A: We're living here seventeen years.
(Mick C., Belfast.)

In such contexts, of course, StE requires a simple or expanded form of the perfect.

The structural divergence from standard patterns that HE exhibits in this area of the grammar has often been attributed to interference from Irish Gaelic (e.g. Joyce 1910, Bliss 1972, Sullivan 1980). There can be little doubt that the hot-news PI form illustrated in (3) is a calque on an Irish construction that has an identical semantic reading:

(7) Tá sé tréis an bád a dhíol.
BE+nonpast HE AFTER THE BOAT SELLING
HE: He's after selling the boat.

As far as the other nonstandard HE features discussed here are concerned, however, the case for Irish origins is much weaker. In fact, it can be shown that they occur to a certain extent in present-day varieties of English spoken outside Ireland. For example, the use of the preterite in contexts where British StE requires the perfect is also characteristic of many American varieties. (Compare American Did you eat yet? with British Have you eaten yet?) HE PII, illustrated in (1), looks very similar to the old 'split' perfect which survives sporadically in British StE and to a greater extent in American and Scottish varieties (e.g. He had another volume written - see Kirchner 1952:401 ff). Even more tellingly from the viewpoint of the history of HE, all the features in question with the exception of hot-news PI can be shown to have been current in Early Modern English, including at least some of the seventeenth-century varieties that formed the main input to HE. The historical and present-day comparative evidence suggests that Irish interference in this area of the grammar has been largely reinforcing or 'preservative' (Weinreich 1966) rather than direct and exclusive. The structural differences between HE and StE here and in other parts of the grammar to a large extent reflect the selective geographical and social diffusion of certain changes, including those that have led to the rise of the modern perfect. Basic HE retains the older 'split' perfect and the be resultative, as well as conservative uses of the preterite and the present in contexts where they have been replaced by the modern perfect in more innovative varieties. (See Harris 1984 for a much fuller dicussion of these issues.) The implication is that the structural divergence from standard patterns exhibited by HE is not solely a reflection of contact-induced-change but is also likely to be characteristic of conditions of interface, both past and present, between non-contact nonstandard varieties and StE.

3 CROSS-DIALECTAL MISCOMPREHENSIONS

The structural mismatch between British StE and HE in the area of time reference usually covered by the standard perfect form can reasonably be assumed to underlie some misunderstandings that have been observed to occur between Irish and British speakers of English. The potential communicative problems were recognised as long ago as 1909 by Hayden & Hartog. They report a court case in Ireland where a question formulated by an 'over-anglicised' counsel with the StE perfect (Had he had his breakfast?) produces a puzzled response from a HE-speaking witness (1909:936). The judge repairs the communicative breakdown by reformulating the question first with hot-news PI and then with PII. Similar misunderstandings can be observed in the present day. The examples presented in this section are of actual conversational exchanges, each of which was observed and immediately afterwards

recorded orthographically. Similar cases are reported and fully discussed by Lesley Milroy (1984).

The following example is an extract from a conversation that took place in Belfast between a local speaker (A) and a standard-speaking visitor who had just arrived from England:

(8) A (HE): How long are you here then?
B (StE): Well, I'm thinking of leaving next Thursday.
A: Oh...I mean...When did you get here?
B: Just this morning actually.

The misunderstanding in (8) arises because the present form in How long are you here? encodes extended-now time in HE but future time in StE. The intended meaning of A's initial question is thus apparently StE 'How long have you been here?'; B, however, interprets it as 'How long are you going to be here?'. In this example, the breakdown in communication is quickly repaired, but there are cases where this sort of misunderstanding passes undetected, perhaps until some later point in the conversation, by which time the source of the communicative failure is no longer recoverable. An example, involving the same sentence as in (7), is provided by the following exchange:

(9) C (HE): How long are you here, Mike?
D (StE): Oh, just a couple of days.
C: Funny I didn't bump into you before, isn't it?
D: Well, I only got in a couple of hours ago.
C: Uh?...
D: So, how are things anyway?

The communicative problem in this exchange is compounded by the fact that D's initial response Just a couple of days is consistent with both the StE and the HE interpretations of How long are you here ?. That is, it could be taken to refer either to 'the past couple of days' (by the rules of HE) or to 'the next couple of days' (the StE interpretation).

In examples (8) and (9) StE speakers misinterpret HE utterances. In (10) the reverse occurs.

(10) E (StE): How long are you staying here?
F (HE): Since Monday.

The expanded present form in the question in (10) is intended to encode future time but is interpreted by F in terms of the rules of HE, i.e. as signalling extended-now time.

A less frequent but no less real source of miscomprehension between British and Irish speakers of English involves the be after V+ing construction. As pointed out in the last section, this can have the meaning 'want to do' in colloquial British English (although here be after occurs much more commonly with non-gerundial objects, as in He's after my job). In HE, as we have seen on the other hand, the construction has the hot-news

meaning 'have just done', i.e. PI as in (3). This difference emerged quite clearly from the results of a questionnaire which was administered to 145 HE speakers and 63 English English speakers. Respondents were asked the following question:

(11) Someone said - I'm after getting a cup of tea. What do you think they meant?
(a) I had a cup of tea a couple of minutes ago.
(b) I had a cup of tea last week.
(c) I want to go for a cup of tea now.

The responses presented in Table 1 clearly show the hot-news interpretation (11a) to be overwhelmingly accepted by the HE speakers. The majority of English English speakers, in contrast, selected the 'future of intention' reading (11c). Of the twelve English respondents who chose (11a), eleven recognised the construction as 'Irish' but said that they themselves would not use it. The potential for cross-dialectal misunderstanding is obvious; it surfaces in the following exchange between an English English speaker (G) and a HE speaker (H):

(12) G: Jane's after going to the University.
H: Yeah? Was she just having a look round?
G: What?...No, she hasn't actually been up there yet. She's hoping to get in next year.

PI is apparently not correctly labelled or recognised by the majority of non-HE speakers. Even when their attention is drawn to the construction, many English speakers are unable to use it appropriately and productively. (Witness such stereotypical stage-Irishisms as Would you be after having a cup of tea? which is unlikely in HE; at least certainly not with the meaning 'Would you like a cup of tea?'.) Putting it in Labov's terms (1973), a panlectal grammar of English 'stops' short of PI.

Table 1. Responses to the question: Someone said - I'm after getting a cup of tea. What do think they meant?

Speakers	HE	English English
Interpretation		
(11a)	143	12
(11b)	2	0
(11c)	0	51
N =	145	63

4 CONCLUSION

Given the structural mismatch between StE and HE outlined in Section 2, we are in a position to appreciate why cross-dialectal misunderstandings of the sort illustrated in Section 3 occur. We are also in a position to account for the difficulty many speakers of HE apparently have in gaining full productive command of certain standard verbal usages. For example, a common 'error' among such speakers is the use of the StE perfect in contexts which, according to standard rules, are inappropriate, e.g:

(13) I've done a course two years ago.

They've been here when we came.

Such examples may reflect interference from the HE tense-aspect system and the hypercorrect overgeneralisation of a strategy which runs something like: 'sometimes it sounds more correct to use the StE perfect instead of the preterite'.

Consider what implications the observed communicative problems under discussion here have for the polylectal grammar hypothesis. Native speakers of nonstandard English are continually exposed to StE in some form or other: through daily contact with the media, the education system, public administration, or whatever. The widely held assumption is that sustained exposure of this sort enables the nonstandard speaker to gain at least receptive command of a superposed standard variety. If we are to believe that this is achieved through the construction of a polylectal grammar, it follows that speakers of any nonstandard dialect which does not share a complete underlying identity with the standard are going to have to do some restructuring of their native grammars. This task is presumably more difficult than simply reorganising low-level rules, which, according to the usual polylectal grammar hypothesis, is how differences between mainstream dialects are surmounted. In this connection, structurally located cross-dialectal misunderstandings point to one of two conclusions. Either many speakers are unsuccessful in their bid to construct polylectal grammars if this involves overcoming deep-seated structural mismatches. Or speakers don't operate with polylectal grammars at all but rely on other strategies for understanding speakers of dialects other than their native one, strategies which sometimes let them down in cases where the degree of interdialectal structural divergence gets too great.

Although the polylectal grammar seems an appropriate means of modelling the competence of speakers who switch between lects in their production, the case for extending it to receptive competence is not particularly strong. The extension is based on the premise that understanding a sentence implies knowing the grammar that generates it. If this argument is carried through, it very quickly leads to some absurd conclusions, as Smith & Wilson point out (1979:197). For instance, a speaker's ability to comprehend sentences which are unacceptable in terms of his

native grammar (e.g. as produced by non-native speakers or young children) can surely not be taken to indicate that he restructures his grammar to deal with them. It has been argued elsewhere that cross-dialectal communication does not necessarily depend on the listener's manipulation of rules of grammar but also involves frequent recourse to more general comprehension strategies (e.g. Matthews 1979:41ff; Smith & Wilson 1979:197ff; Trudgill 1982; L.Milroy 1984). Such strategies include amongst other things making reference to contextual cues (both linguistic and pragmatic) and drawing analogical connections between unfamiliar utterances and sentences produced by the native grammar. In other words, speaker-hearers attempt to surmount potential communicative problems arising out of structural mismatches between dialects in an essentially ad hoc manner. This view ties in with evidence that no simple correlation can be drawn between interlingual intelligibility and structural relatedness (see especially Wolff 1964). Rather than assuming that cross-dialectal communication points to the reality of a shared panlectal grammar, it makes better sense to say that it proceeds reasonably successfully despite structural differences which sometimes may be quite deep-seated. If we adopt the latter position, we should not be surprised to find that ad hoc comprehension strategies sometimes fail to avert structurally located communicative problems of the sort discussed here.

NOTES

1. The examples of cross-dialectal miscommunication presented here were included in an informal draft which appeared in Belfast Working Papers in Language and Linguistics 6 (1982). I am grateful to Jim and Lesley Milroy for their comments on an earlier version of the paper.

2. The terms hot news and extended now are taken from Mc Cawley 1971 and Mc Coard 1978 respectively.

3. Unless otherwise specified, all the referenced examples in Section 2 are culled from the tapes of the Social Science Research Council-funded projects Speech community and language variety in Belfast and Sociolinguistic variation and linguistic change in Belfast.

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